

THE BRIDGES OF BELGRADE

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After the turbulent 1990s, which included the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, armed conflict and NATO bombardments, Serbia has made great efforts to become a full member of the international community. The “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference, hosted by Serbia in Belgrade in October 2007 on the theme “Building Bridges to the Future”, was the largest high-level international political meeting held in the country for many years. Thus, the Conference constituted a further step in the return of Serbia as a fully-fledged partner in the international arena.

The Belgrade Ministerial Conference was the sixth in the “Environment for Europe” process. The previous one was held in Kiev four years ago. One of the important features in this process is the preparation that starts two years before the Ministerial Conference. This gives time for thorough preparatory work, including the negotiations of a declaration and the preparation of major documents. The Belgrade Ministerial Conference was particularly rich in substance, with contributions from a great number of partners.

The usefulness of a given meeting can be assessed using different indicators. One is participation. The Belgrade Ministerial Conference attracted more than 1,000 official delegates – including 60 ministers, deputy ministers and state secretaries, with 16 coming from the education sector – and around 2,000 observers and other participants. More than 60 side-events were arranged by different stakeholders during the two-and-a-half days of the Conference. A workshop on the Conference themes was attended by more than 100 journalists, mainly from the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. In many sessions, the list of speakers exceeded the time available. One cannot help but conclude that this broad and active participation is a strong indication that the Conference was seen as important and meaningful by Governments and other partners.

WHAT DID MINISTERS DISCUSS IN BELGRADE?

State of the environment and monitoring and assessment

Delegations taking part in the discussion on this subject welcomed the Pan-European assessment report on the state of the environment (“Belgrade Assessment”) prepared by the European Environment Agency (EEA) in cooperation with UNECE and other partners. They highlighted specific findings of the report, especially those on climate change, biodiversity, water supply and sanitation, marine environment, renewable energy, and sustainable consumption and production patterns. The delegations stressed the need to focus future actions under the “Environment for Europe” process on improving monitoring so as to produce environmental data in an integrated manner, on building countries’ capacities in environmental observation, and on applying an ecosystems approach in environmental assessments. They further stressed the need to produce the next assessment report for the 2011 “Environment for Europe” Conference.

The link was emphasized between the “Belgrade Assessment” report and other reports presented to the Conference, including the report on UNECE Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs) and one on environmental policies in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. It was stressed that there was a need in the future to use in assessment reports data produced by governmental institutions rather than data from informal sources.

Speakers praised the First assessment of transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwaters in the UNECE region, and called for the next assessment to be delivered at the next “Environment for Europe” Conference.

Implementation of multilateral environmental agreements and findings of UNECE Environmental Performance Reviews

Speakers stressed that the five UNECE environmental conventions and the UNECE EPR Programme contributed significantly to improving environmental policy in the region by addressing environmental disparities in the countries of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. They served as a basis for many national actions aimed at better environmental management, integration of environmental policies into other sectors, and promotion of sustainable development. It was also noted that the UNECE conventions and EPR Programme contributed to environmental security in the region.



Participants acknowledged that significant efforts and progress had been made by the countries reviewed since the first round of EPRs, in particular on convergence of environmental policies; on strategies and legislation; on increased involvement in international environmental cooperation; and on improved public participation. Tailor-made EPR recommendations provided an impetus for improving institutional frameworks and management, for making national environmental policies more effective, and for strengthening international cooperation. It was noted that national reports showed improved implementation of the environmental conventions by an increasing number of countries. The majority of parties had introduced the adequate legislative frameworks necessary for fulfilling their obligations and had engaged in bilateral and multilateral cooperation.


Nevertheless, the implementation of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) across the region was not consistent and there was a need for further action. Countries underlined the importance of speeding up the ratification of the UNECE conventions and their protocols. Major bottlenecks in the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and in SEE countries, highlighted in the most recent EPRs and reflected in the document “Critical issues in the implementation of environmental policies”, also hampered the efficient implementation of MEAs. Speakers welcomed the specific recommendations to countries for overcoming the bottlenecks examined in the document.

The “Guidelines for strengthening compliance with and implementation of multilateral environmental agreements in the UNECE region” (“Kiev Guidelines”) endorsed at the Kiev Ministerial Conference continue to be a useful tool for addressing difficulties in implementing and complying with MEAs, according to a number of speakers. Specific national implementation plans should be developed to ensure a strategic approach for compliance with MEAs as well as for setting priorities for the implementation of the EPR recommendations. As the implementation of many MEAs involved more than one competent authority, it is essential to establish good cooperation and coordination between national authorities and other stakeholders.

It was stressed that there was a need to develop the existing capacity-building activities under the conventions into consolidated programmes with well-defined priorities and actions, to help the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and SEE countries address the difficulties of fully implementing the basic requirements of MEAs. On the other hand, speakers noted that new European Union (EU) member states should continue to share their experience and good practice from the transition period with countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and SEE countries, so as to bring those countries closer to internationally recognized environmental standards.

Joint session on Education for Sustainable Development

Education and Environment Ministers of the UNECE region met for the first time in the history of the “Environment for Europe” process and, in a joint statement, reaffirmed their commitment to the implementation of education for sustainable development (ESD) in the region. They considered achievements, lessons learned and challenges identified in the implementation of the UNECE Strategy for ESD since the Kiev Conference, and agreed on the way ahead. They were satisfied that the commitments made in Kiev and Vilnius had been fulfilled. They reconfirmed that ESD empowered people to make



informed choices in favour of sustainable development and could thereby play an important role in overcoming social, economic and environmental challenges. They also stressed that climate change was the issue that tests the solidarity around the globe through our attitudes in daily life.

The UNECE Strategy for ESD remained a unique example of the regional implementation of ESD among the different initiatives developed in the framework of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and hence served as an example for other regions.

The speakers highly appreciated the close and effective collaboration between UNECE and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), especially in monitoring progress. Another key achievement was the joint UNECE-UNESCO collection of good practices in ESD.

Roundtable on Biodiversity

Participants gave recognition to the achievements of Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other partners since 2003 in the implementation of the Kiev Resolution on Biodiversity, but also stressed that the EEA report stated that the 2010 target would be difficult to achieve without increased efforts. Participants further stressed the need for a pan-European instrument to push this process forward, expressing their appreciation for the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy and its work.

A reference was made to the multifunctionality of forest ecosystems, as well as to the link between the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity, as both were important tools for addressing the effects of climate change on biodiversity. Another challenge related to climate change was that at the same time the region was seeking economic and social development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Investment in biodiversity conservation, it was noted, was also required to maintain the valuable services it provides to the economy. Participants said that it was necessary to find new and creative ways to protect biodiversity, such as incentives, new forms of financing and payments for ecosystem services. Cooperation at the pan-European level to develop these instruments should be promoted.

Progress and perspectives in implementation of the Environment Strategy for countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia

Delegates welcomed the report, "Policies for a better environment: progress in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia", as well as the other reports prepared for the session.

The report documented more than 200 positive actions that the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia had taken since the 2003 Kiev Ministerial Conference. A number of speakers gave examples of actions they had taken. The main legal and policy frameworks for effective environmental protection had been put in place by many countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. Noticeable progress had been achieved in several areas: enforcement and compliance, water supply and sanitation, water resources management, and agriculture. This was not to say that the situation in these areas is now satisfactory; rather that some progress had been made in some countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

Many speakers emphasized the implementation gap that exists in most countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia: the actions taken to date had generally not been sufficient to achieve the objectives that had been set. This had been related to insufficient means – finance, human and institutional capacity. However, it was also linked to insufficient incentives: pricing of water, energy and other resources was still very low; enforcement of appropriate standards was not changing the behaviour of enterprises; and public demand was not generating sufficient political pressure. There was no equivalent to EU accession as a driver of environmental improvement in countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. Convergence with the environmental performance in Western Europe therefore would have to be driven more by internal forces.

Delegates recognized the important role that donor support provided. In absolute terms, donor support was not large, and had been declining, but it played an important catalytic role. Several donors described their activities in countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and pledged their willingness to continue this support. However, donor programmes were changing, including that of the European Commission, which was now the largest in the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. These changes underlined the importance for the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia of including the environment in national economic strategies, poverty reduction strategies, and donor cooperation programmes.



Implementation of the Central Asian Initiative on Sustainable Development

Ministers and heads of delegation from the Central Asian countries presented progress made in implementation and prospects for the Central Asian Initiative for Sustainable Development.

Participants considered it appropriate that the future “Environment for Europe” process have a subregional focus to reflect changing realities, priorities and development trends, both in Central Asia and globally. The Central Asian countries stated that, despite their not being included within the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies, the region played an important part in environmental sustainability both at the continental level within Eurasia, and globally. Participants noted the role of Central Asia as a bridge between Europe and dynamically developing China and India, which embraced almost half the world’s population. At the same time, Central Asia was for Europe an important supplier of energy and potentially a large market.

South-East European perspectives

Ministers and heads of delegation taking part in the discussion welcomed the Belgrade initiative on enhancing subregional South-East European cooperation in the field of climate change. The countries welcomed the establishment of the climate change centre in Belgrade aimed at implementing a capacity-building action plan for South-Eastern Europe, and some of them stressed that they would explore opportunities to support such activities. They emphasized the need for improved cooperation within the region and for fostering international partnerships to raise the capacity of the countries to cope with emerging issues related to adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

Meeting the challenges of EU membership requirements would demand an overall strengthening of environmental management systems as well as the strengthening of capacity-building at all levels of administration. Assistance would be needed for further harmonization of legislation and for its implementation as well as for the acceptance and implementation of regional and global environmental agreements.

Environmental policy and international competitiveness: can we afford a better environment?

There was general agreement that improving environmental performance and strengthening international competitiveness were not per se conflicting policy objectives. There was as such no trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection. Rather, a clean environment could provide the economic edge in the future.

More stringent environmental policy should not be regarded as a luxury which could be postponed until higher levels of economic prosperity had been achieved. Given the close linkages between the economy and the environment, it was important to ensure an effective integration of environmental protection with sectoral and national economic development strategies. Governments needed to build a capable and sufficiently strong civil service for the planning and implementation of effective environmental policies. Countries should establish institutional arrangements for a continuous dialogue among all stakeholders, including the public, with the aim of a balanced and integrated consideration of economic, social and environmental issues.

There was a broad agreement that clean and environmentally friendly technologies, in combination with more stringent environmental standards, played a key role for increasing efficiency of resource use and reducing the pollution intensity of economic activity, including agriculture and forestry. The need for technological upgrading of the productive capital stock provided countries, notably low-income countries but also developed countries, with considerable opportunities for improved environmental performance.

Many speakers noted that more stringent environmental standards worldwide had in fact spurred the development of a rapidly growing market for environmentally sound technologies. The production of these clean technologies had become an important source of competitive advantage, as reflected in strong growth of profits and employment in this sector.

Environmental finance

Speakers in the environmental finance discussion outlined the wide diversity of environmental financing instruments and the need for innovation in environmental financing. In this regard, they stressed the importance of financing for research and development and the need to optimize conditions for private sector involvement. A speaker provided a number of examples of initiatives designed to create incentives for utilities, businesses and investors to provide capital and technology for environmental infrastructure. The importance of public sector involvement, effective regulation, and thorough impact assessment in investments in environmental infrastructure was also emphasized.

Partnerships to support the implementation of environmental policies and programmes

Speakers that participated in the discussion referred to numerous partnership initiatives launched in the UNECE region since the Johannesburg summit on sustainable development.

The role of the environmental dimension of security was emphasized. Interrelationships between climate change and increasing floods and fluctuations in the level of the Caspian Sea, causing economic losses and leading to social tension in the subregions concerned, were mentioned. Other examples included transboundary water pollution and degradation of biodiversity threatening security at the national and local levels. The Environment and Security Initiative was supported as it helped to ease tensions between the UNECE countries concerned with regard to specific transboundary watercourses.

The importance of partnerships to promote sustainable consumption and production (SCP) patterns was emphasized. Examples of national initiatives to promote SCP were presented together with bilateral and multilateral projects. The need to develop regional programmes on SCP was stressed by some speakers. Explicit reference was made to company initiatives on clean cars and less sulphur content in fuels, eco-driving, eco-schools, clean production and green procurement. Several countries stressed the importance of the Clean Fuels and Vehicles Partnership, the results achieved and existing challenges.

Private sector speakers voiced their readiness to contribute to resolving environmental problems should public authorities establish clear rules for private sector involvement.

WHAT WAS NEW?

Although this assessment is of course somewhat subjective, I have ventured to pick out four items that I think constitute particular highlights of the Belgrade Ministerial Conference.

- (a) Much emphasis was given to better implementation of commitments. Reference to major implementation gaps was made in all assessment reports: the one by EEA, the UNECE reports on the EPR Programme and the UNECE legal instruments on the environment, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on the Environment Strategy for countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. Ministers clearly wanted more concrete impact on the ground in countries. One embarrassment referred to was the fact that not one of the three legal instruments adopted in Kiev four years ago has entered into force.
- (b) The important role of the environmental administrations in designing good policy and ensuring implementation was underlined in Belgrade more strongly than before. In particular, in many countries in transition the environmental administrations have been weakened rather than strengthened since Kiev. Without sufficiently strong professional administration on environment, there is not much hope for better implementation. As economic development recently has been quite favourable in most of these countries, economic problems are not an acceptable pretext for keeping the environmental administrations feeble.
- (c) The UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development was adopted in Vilnius in 2005 following negotiations between environment and education ministries based on a decision in Kiev. This broad Strategy is now in its first phase of implementation. The session in Belgrade indicated an almost overwhelming interest among the participating partners for furthering the Strategy in practice. This bodes well for future work, which anyway will be challenging.
- (d) Also, the session on economic competitiveness and environmental policy opened new paths. The environmental community has not been visible in the debate that has often included rough simplifications with regard to assumed conflicts between a competitive economy and progressive environmental policies. Based on a ground-breaking document prepared by the UNECE secretariat, ministers could now conclude that no country in the region is too poor for a sensible environmental policy. On the contrary, environmental improvements can and should be part of a dynamic economic policy which favours implementation of new technologies. Hopefully, this debate can continue in suitable forums after the Conference.



AND WHAT NOW?

There will be a next “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference, as ministers accepted the invitation of the Government of Kazakhstan to host the meeting in Astana in 2011. The preparations will be serviced by the UNECE secretariat.

But participants also wanted to reform the process. Possible amendments to the process had been extensively discussed before Kiev and were again during the preparations for Belgrade. Countries could not, however, agree on more than cosmetic changes and general expressions of new priorities.

For the present, ministers decided that the impact, priorities and costs of the process should be reviewed. The importance of using partnerships more effectively in support of implementation and promoting wider involvement of the private sector were also mentioned.

The partnership concept was introduced in the preparations of the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. Since then, it has developed into a virtual buzzword for a great variety of cooperative arrangements. The real impact of the different partnerships has, however, been difficult to establish. Some partnerships have been successful and others less so. Reform of the “Environment for Europe” process might try and establish a framework for assessing and improving the effectiveness of partnerships, so that strengths and weaknesses could be better identified.

The role of the private sector, business and industry has been a mainstay in the preparations for the conferences. In Sofia in 1995, business was quite closely involved. In Aarhus in 1998, there was disappointment concerning the role of business. The European Commission took the lead in trying to have a more active contribution from business for Kiev. However, despite an active attempt by the Commission, the results were meagre. Much more was not achieved in this regard in Belgrade.

Preparations for the reform of the “Environment for Europe” process will commence soon as a first outline for the reform is discussed by the Bureau of the Committee on Environmental Policy in late January 2008. The full Committee will voice its opinion at its meeting in April 2008. Thereafter, a period of broad consultations with stakeholders will begin. The final proposals for reform from the Committee are expected by the end of 2008. In Belgrade, the opinion was expressed that the environment ministers should keep a firm grip on the reform process, and accordingly, a special session on ministerial level of the Committee should be convened to approve the draft reform. The final stamp of approval would be put in place by the UNECE Commission at its session in spring 2009. Soon thereafter, the preparations for the Astana Ministerial Conference would start.